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ABSTRACT

Intended for middle school teachers interested in helping students (especially those with no experience attending theater) learn how to read and see a play by themselves, this paper provides a lesson plan based on W. W. Jacobs's dramatic play, "The Monkey's Paw." After furnishing a rationale for reading this particular play, the paper discusses the general instructional objectives that students should attain after having read, discussed, and interpreted a well-made and worthwhile play. The paper considers various strategies for teaching the play, including how much time to spend on background, reading the play as a script, and basic terms for dealing with the structure (plot). The paper then addresses the scene-by-scene interpretation of the "Monkey's Paw," providing discussion questions on each scene, as well as on producing the play and on the setting, lighting, properties, makeup, and costuming. The paper concludes with a list of eight different ways to evaluate the students' success in learning about the play, and with a brief coda that reiterates the purpose of the lesson plan and its usefulness for future studies of dramatic texts. (NKA)

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The Play's the Thing: Showing Middle School Students How to Read a Play, "The Monkey's Paw"

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Showing middle school students how to see a play as they read it is my purpose here. Even though I take for granted the inexplicable magic of live theater, I need at the onset to ask myself why teach kids to read drama, why take valuable class time to instruct them in reading a play.

First, I know drama is the oldest form of narrative, of storytelling. When I first think of "drama," what first comes to mind is something that entertains, of people flocking to Broadway musicals or of their watching TV shows with policemen and crooks or of seeing movies with monsters and space ships. But the ancient Greeks, I know, invented plays not to entertain but to enlighten; their plays were sacred community vehicles for presenting a non-literate people the acceptable and non-acceptable ways of acting, the codes of behavior for their culture. I realize the Greeks did write comedies, but I also realize they took drama much more seriously than we do now: plays were an integral part of their lives. Although Willy Loman is not, according to Aristotle, a tragic hero, the ancient Greeks would be more at home watching Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman than they would A Chorus Line. So a good play--one that people have seen fit to save--embodies implicitly, rather than teaching explicitly--issues which are basic to a culture's survival. These are the real reasons why school youngsters should be taught how to apprehend worthwhile dramatic texts.

If the ways of behaving enacted in plays are so important, why not simply

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state them in an essay or philosophical treatise, one might ask. Because that's not the way we comprehend in a lasting way. When we see humans on a stage in conflict over profound human matters, we perceive the codes of behavior made flesh and blood, and we remember and learn. Only by reading, discussing, and interpreting a worthwhile play and then by producing it will students learn how to read and see a play by themselves, especially young people who have no tradition of playgoing.

Why Read this Play (Rationale)

Generally speaking, then, students need to learn how to read, interpret, and present a play simply because drama is a basic human activity. In specific terms, though, I need to ask myself why should they read and produce this particular play, "The Monkey's Paw? First, the play is a rousing tale of the supernatural. (Although Stephen King never gives credit for it, the plot of this novel Pet Sematary is that of "The Monkey's Paw.") The plot, furthermore, is a model of a taut, well made dramatic piece with three scenes, a single setting, only five characters, and with every word contributing toward a single preconceived effect.

The play, however, is more than a macabre pot boiler; it deals with an elemental human issue: the possible existence of fate. The characters, although at first meeting they appear ordinary enough, represent various responses to this notion. Herbert, the son, is skeptical of the power of the monkey's paw. Sergeant-Major Morris, a credible witness, is one who has observed first hand the powers of the occult. Mr. White, the father, believes in fate if it brings him personal gain. Mrs. White, the mother, initially uninterested in

the men's debates, believes in unnatural forces the most strongly when they are called upon to return her son from the dead. This is a tightly constructed play, then, one which reveals through characters in action various views toward a supernatural manifestation of fate, with the most satisfying response to the notion of fate being--in this play, at least--that it is better not to contest fate but to live one's life ignorant of the unseen and irrational forces to be unleashed by our meddling with the unknown.

Knowledge the Students will Assimilate and the Skills They Will Practice (General Instructional Objectives)

Now that I have justified to myself teaching drama and this particular play, I need to spell out what knowledge the students will be acquiring and the skills they will be honing throughout instruction, in terms of general instructional objectives. The objectives will inform my teaching methods and direct my evaluations of how well the students have met the objectives.

After having read, discussed, and interpreted a well made and worthwhile play and presented it orally as readers' theater, acting with scripts, or actually produced it in the classroom or on stage, the students will be able to

--respond emotionally, possibly with personal associations, to a play,

--describe the setting of a play, including its physical location, furniture and other properties,

--explain what the characters in the play are like, based upon how the playwright describes them and what they say and do,

--tell how characters move around the stage and explain the relationships

between their movements and personalities to the overall meaning of the play,

--describe dramatic elements of plot, initial situation, rising action, climax, and final resolution and tell how the elements are exemplified in a play and relate their significance to the total impact of the play,

--discuss with the teacher and with other students questions (teacher or student created) designed to help comprehend setting, characters, and plot of a play,

--make a statement about the value of a play, based upon intrinsic and extrinsic criteria, the statement being substantiated by evidence from the play, and

--cooperate with other students and adults in producing a play, using one of three approaches: readers' theater, production with a script, or actual production.

How to Teach the Play (Teaching Strategies)

As I turn to teaching the play, I need to make a number of professional judgments. If my students are fairly sophisticated about reading and producing plays, then I can review quickly the matters of plot, character development, theme, staging, and so forth. If the students are largely ignorant of these matters--as I suspect most middle school youngsters would be--then it's necessary to spend some time introducing and establishing these notions. In any event, I want to have the students read the play fairly quickly for an initial personal reaction and then have them read it over a second time more carefully and systematically, after which they will finally produce the play for an audience.

Reading the Play as a Script

To have a firm basis for future reading of plays, students need essentially to read the play as a script. I'll explain to the students that when a director and actors first read a play as a group, they follow this procedure. I have the students sit in a circle or have them move their seats around to form a rectangular table large enough to include everybody. I assign them various parts, showing them as they go along how to read a dramatic text as a script, so they might assimilate setting, character, physical appearance, mannerisms, voice, background, motivation, delivery of lines and overall pacing and tone of the play.

Setting In order to introduce them to setting, I draw a diagram of a typical proscenium arch stage on the chalk board, and, under my direction, have them "set the stage" by drawing in the features of the set, including walls, windows, drapes and all furniture and other properties and their positions on the stage. Later, I might encourage students who wish to draw or paint a picture of the set or construct a model of the set design.

Characters I tell the students that they can begin to understand the characters by visualizing what they look like from studying the playwright's descriptions of their physical appearances. In "The Monkey's Paw," the author tells us that Mrs. White is "a pleasant-looking woman," for instance, but leaves it up to the readers to create their own images of how the characters look.

I learn most about the characters in a play, however, by what they say and do. I need to impress upon the students that from speeches and behavior of the characters, they can gather evidence to substantiate their responses to the play and justify their interpretations of the play.

Plot If they are ignorant of traditional ways of viewing plot, I introduce basic terms dealing with the structure of a play. I may either run off the items with a copy for each student or write them down on the chalkboard and take a few minutes discussing them to make sure we all share generally agreed upon meanings. A play, like any other story, I point out, has to start at a certain place, move along in a specific direction, and end satisfactorily. It has, in other words, a beginning, middle, and ending, and the parts all fit together--like any work of art--in a satisfying whole.

1. Initial Situation. The first part of a play introduces the conflict. If it is a short play, usually one major character meets a single problem or conflict, about which he or she must make a decision. The rest of the play deals with how the major character attempts to resolve the problem and what happens as a result of his or her behavior.

2. Rising Action. After the playwright has established the major conflict, introduced the characters, and provided the necessary exposition--with the best plays, subtly and unobtrusively--he must keep our interest in the play. He does this by introducing a series of complications following from the main character's reaction to the initial conflict.

3. Climax. The climax is the high point of the play, the part of greatest intensity. It is the instant at which the chief character decides to act one way or another with respect to the major conflict.

4. Resolution. The resolution is what happens to the main character--and to the characters who have reacted to him in some way--as a result of how we behaved when faced with the major conflict. The technical term for the final resolution in a play is the French word dénouement--literally translated as

"untying"--which signifies an "unravelling of the plot of a play or novel."

Reading Orally, Discussing, and Interpreting the Play

After the students have read the play out loud fairly quickly, I now have them re-read the play in a systematic fashion. At this point, it's a good idea to have them read out loud each of the three scenes separately and discuss the play as a group, following--but certainly not restricted by--guide questions. Once they have learned how to use teacher designed questions, they will become confident with framing their own questions as a technique for satisfying for themselves what is happening in a play.

Discussing Scene One

1. What is the setting of the play? Describe the White cottage. How is it furnished and where are the furnishings placed?

2. What does Mrs. White look like? How does she feel about the men's wishing on the monkey's paw?

3. Describe Mr. White. What do we learn about him from Scene One?

4. Tell us about the Sergeant-Major. (First of all, what is a Sergeant-Major? What kind of a man becomes and remains a Sergeant-Major?) He says he is "tough." How do we know this? Relate the story he tells about the monkey's paw. What is the "essential meaning" of this story to you? State your understanding in a few sentences. Is this an unusual tale to be told by a "tough" army man? Why?

5. In an effective opening scene, the playwright includes words and events that will crop up later in the play. We call this practice "foreshadowing." Every word, especially in a short play, counts. Note where these details occur,

and, after you have read the whole play, relate their significance to the plot:

--exactly how much money Mr. White still owes on the house.

--Herbert's shift at work. At what time does he usually come home?

--what kind of job Herbert has.

--what the first wish on the monkey's paw was.

--why the old fakir put the curse on the monkey's paw. How the wish would come true "so natural."

--what the bolt on the front door to the cottage was like.

Discussing Scene Two

1. What does Mr. Sampson look like? What is his purpose in the play?

2. How does the playwright keep our suspense in Scene Two after the initial conflict? What complications arise?

3. How was Herbert killed? How was his killing related to the initial conflict? Did we have a hint--a "foreshadowing"--in Scene Two of how he was to die? What was it?

Discussing Scene Three

1. How long has it been between Scene Two and Scene Three?

2. Why does Mrs. White, who didn't believe in the monkey's paw, now want to make a wish on it?

3. What foreshadowing do we have that if Herbert is brought back to life, it would not be a good thing?

4. What is the effect of the candle going out--"utter darkness"-- as Mrs. White makes her wish?

5. Why didn't Herbert appear immediately when Mrs. White wished for him alive?

6. How does the playwright keep the suspense mounting toward the end of Scene Three? Describe in detail how he accomplishes this.

7. Why does Mr. White make the last wish? Explain.

8. What is the effect of the ending of the scene--quiet after "tempestuous" knocking, "a flood of moonlight. Emptiness. The old man sways in prayer on his knees. The old woman lies half swooning, wailing against the door post." Explain in your own words what is happening.

Discussing the Play as a Whole

Now that the students have read the entire play over a second time, we need to talk about it as a whole. Questions like these are designed to encourage general discussion.

1. How did the reading of the play make you feel? Explain your feelings.

2. Did you enjoy the play? Why or why not? Did it hold your interest? If so, how did it do so? Did you wish to know what would happen next once you started reading?

3. Although the basic idea is an incredible one, how did the playwright make the plot seem plausible? Did the complications, for instance, proceed realistically from the initial conflict? Given the way the characters reveal themselves, was the climax appropriate? Was the final resolution--dénouement--satisfying? Did you feel at the ending, this is the way "things should be"?

4. Were the characters believable? In what ways? Was what they said consistent with what they did?

5. What do you suppose the playwright is saying about people and life in general? You might wish to think about the friendly dispute between Herbert and the Sergeant-Major in Scene One.

6. How good was the play? There are two ways of judging the play. First, how well was it put together? And second, does the play deal with something important for people to think about? Support your evaluation with evidence from the text.

Putting on the Play

Now that the students have read the play out loud quickly for a general impression and re-read it more carefully, following systematic strategies, the students would find it rewarding to produce the play in one of three ways.

Readers' Theater: The actors sit on stools before an audience in class or on a stage and read from their scripts held in binders.

Production with Scripts: The actors walk through the play with scripts in their hands before an audience in class or on a stage.

Actual Production: The actors produce the play before an audience in class or on stage. The actors memorize their lines, use expressive gestures, move about the stage, wear costumes, and use properties, like furniture and other objects.

If the students stage an actual production, they need to decide about these matters:

Setting. Should there be flats to designate the White house or should there be just curtains and the necessary furniture and other properties?

Lighting. How would lighting and other special effects be used?

Parts. Which students would be best suited for the roles? Students who wish to play certain parts should "read" or "try out." It may be advisable to have more than one "cast" for the play, to give more students practice acting.

Makeup. How should the characters appear? What makeup is needed?

Costuming. What costumes are necessary?

Properties. What furniture and other properties should be rounded up?

Acting. the students need to learn the fundamentals of acting on a stage:

--how to move across a stage and upstage and downstage,

--how to assume stage positions,

--how to memorize lines,

--how to reflect emotions,

--how to make stage gestures,

--how to play a character realistically, such as an old lady or a military man, and

--how to achieve and vary pace.

Evaluation

If my purpose is to teach middle school students to see a play as they read it, then my evaluation techniques are directly related to my purpose. Moreover, if my General Instructional Objectives are realistic and worthwhile, I can use them directly for evaluating the students' success.

What follow are various ways of assessing how well the students have learned the terms related to dramatic literature and how well they can perform the skills necessary for reading, responding, and interpreting plays.

1. Students will make an immediate, emotional response to a play (short written response),

2. Students will describe or define, with examples,

--the general elements of setting, plot, characters, and theme,

--dramatic elements of a play, such as initial situation, rising action, climax, and final resolution,

--the three kinds of play production, such as Readers' Theater, Production with Scripts, and Actual Production, and

--the basic elements of play production, such as setting, lighting, acting, makeup, properties, and costuming (oral recitation or short written responses),

3. Students will explain how the general elements of a play and the dramatic elements of a play are exemplified in a particular play (oral recitation or short written responses),

4. Students will describe how a particular play could be adapted to various methods of production: Readers' Theater, Production with Scripts, and Actual Production (oral recitation or short written responses),

5. Students will describe how the elements of play production--setting, lighting, acting, makeup, properties, costuming--are demonstrated in a particular play (oral recitation or short written responses),

6. Students will identify the elements of a play and analyze how the elements are employed by the playwright in a particular play (oral recitation or short written responses),

7. Students will make a statement about the value of a play, using intrinsic criteria--e.g., how well the structure of a particular play holds together and extrinsic criteria--e.g., how valuable and valid are the notions revealed in the play about how human beings behave (written response), and

8. Students will read a play they have not read or seen and write a response to the play, including these elements:

--a personal, emotional reaction,

--an analysis of the general elements and dramatic elements of the play and how the playwright has exemplified them in a particular play, and

--a personal statement of the value of the play, basing their evaluation upon intrinsic and extrinsic criteria and upon substantiation from the text.

Where Do We Go from Here?

My middle school students have learned a basic vocabulary for dealing with dramatic texts, have learned by producing a short, well-made play how the elements of dramatic literature work to produce a single powerful effect, and have learned how to use systematic strategies for reading, responding, and interpreting new plays. They are now ready--as they mature socially and psychologically--to apply their internalized understanding of dramaturgy and play production to more challenging full length plays like Our Town and Death of a Salesman, and with the expert guidance of a sensitive and knowledgeable teacher to turn to the great dramatic texts of Western civilization, Hamlet and Antigone. If I have been successful with my planning and instruction, they are well prepared for this most basic and crucial of human endeavors.